

Incorporating the New Civics and Government Standards in All Mock Election Activities

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OBJECTIVES

To ensure that active participation in the National Student/Parent Mock Election is undertaken by informed consent and is both responsible and meaningful, students are to gain knowledge and understanding of:

- ★ the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy.
- ★ the American political system.
- ★ current political issues.
- ★ American political culture.
- ★ the place of the United States in world affairs.

METHODS

The mock election provides teachers with an outstanding opportunity to incorporate the new National Standards for Civics and Government in their teaching.¹ All mock election activities can be built with the following strategies:

1. Impart knowledge and understanding of the American political culture and system, world politics, and fundamental American values and principles (National Standards Sections I–V).
2. Demonstrate the meaning of American citizenship, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the dispositions necessary to further American constitutional democracy (National Standards, Section V, A–D, pp. 127–134).
3. Evoke the responsibility of citizens to participate in public affairs, especially through voting and voter-turnout campaigns (National Standards, Section V, C & E, pp. 131–132; 134–136).

1. The new National Standards for Civics and Government can be obtained from the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302 for \$13.20 (includes postage and handling).

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but inform their discretion."

—Thomas Jefferson

1. Impart knowledge and understanding of the American political culture and system, world politics, and fundamental American values and principles.

A. WEEKLY MEETINGS

Weekly meetings that follow the course of the campaign and a series of follow-up meetings after the end of the campaign can help students synthesize what they are learning as they participate in mock election activities. The weekly meeting is the teacher's golden opportunity to present the questions posed in the new National Standards, as well as to involve parents by inviting them to attend. These questions could drive topics of discussion at the meetings:

- 1.** What is the rule of law (National Standards, pp. 91–93)? In what ways does the idea of the rule of law figure in the campaign? Only as a background assumption? In other ways?
- 2.** What is the American idea of constitutional government (National Standards, pp. 99–100)?
- 3.** What are the fundamental values and principles of American democracy? Which fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy, such as liberalism and republicanism (as defined by the National Standards pp. 8, 106–108), are directly or indirectly evident in the campaign? How do values and principles sometimes conflict (National Standards, pp. 105, 108–109)? Are there examples of this conflict in the campaign?
- 4.** What is the meaning of American citizenship, and what are the rights and responsibilities of American citizens? Specifically:
 - ★ What does citizenship mean? How is citizenship acquired (National Standards, pp. 127–128)?
 - ★ What are personal, political, and economic rights of citizens (as defined by the National Standards, pp. 128–130)?
 - ★ How are each category of these rights relevant in the campaign?
 - ★ What campaign issues touch students, directly or indirectly?
 - ★ What are the responsibilities of citizens? What is politics? What do students think civic life, politics, and government are? How would students compare their experience with the National Standards' descriptions of civic life, politics, and government (pp. 89–90)?
- 5.** What are the purposes of politics? How would students apply competing ideas about the purposes of politics and government found in the National Standards (pp. 90–91) to their experience?
- 6.** What is limited government (National Standards, pp. 91–93)? Does the idea that government should be limited figure in the campaign? How? What is the relationship of limited government to political and economic freedom? Is this relationship apparent in any way in the campaign?
- 7.** What is civil society (National Standards, pp. 91, 93)? How do the associations and organizations of civil society affect the campaign? Do students see evidence of the effects of the voluntary involvement of individuals? What kinds of groups are most prominent? Based on students' campaign experiences, how do they describe the relationship between civil society and politics?
- 8.** What is American political culture (National Standards, pp. 103–104)? Is the U.S. Constitution invoked during the campaign? If so, how is it used?
- 9.** What role does social diversity play in American politics (National Standards, pp. 101, 104)? How is the social pluralism of American society evident in the campaign? What categories of diversity, such as age, socioeconomic status, occupation, and race/ethnicity, play a direct or indirect role in the campaign? How important are they?

10. What is the place of the United States in world affairs (National Standards, pp. 121–126)? How does the United States interact with other nations of the world through diplomacy, trade, the military, immigration, and other ways, and how did issues involving American relations with the world affect the campaign?

B. RESEARCH

Help students prepare for knowledgeable participation in mock election activities by thoroughly researching political issues and candidates via such resources as the Internet, the library, local party offices, public relations advisers of local candidates, and the National Student/Parent Mock Election's own home page on the Internet (www.nationalmockelection.org). If feasible, create your own home page on the Internet and post information about your mock election activities and the general election. Publicizing your Internet address will turn your home page into an informational forum for others who are interested in the mock election. Those unfamiliar with the Internet could benefit greatly from student-developed Internet instruction manuals.

Also consider contacting or having students contact Project Vote Smart, the on-line student/volunteer project in Oregon. Project Vote Smart was founded by students and volunteers for the purpose of collecting "abundant, accurate, relevant information" on representatives and candidates nationwide, such as voting behavior and performance evaluations by all liberal, conservative, and special interest groups who publish them, including positions on issues, sources and amounts of campaign finances, and biographical histories.

C. CAMPAIGN EVALUATIONS

To more thoroughly understand the democratic process, students should objectively evaluate all aspects of each candidate's campaign and the campaign in general—media coverage, newspaper, editorials, campaign speeches, campaign literature—and present their evaluations during and/or after the mock election (or real election) to other students and the public. (For more information on developing evaluations, see Chapter 2 of this guide; for information on publicizing your evaluations, see Chapter 4.)

2. Demonstrate the meaning of American citizenship, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the dispositions necessary to further American constitutional democracy (National Standards, Section V, A–D, pp. 127–134).

Monitoring student and adult participation in election campaign activities and voting can help determine how well participation conforms, or fails to conform, to the traits of civic character necessary for the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy.

Try selecting several students to monitor mock election activities (speech-writing competitions, quiz-team competitions, mock press conferences, school forums, debates, local cable call-in shows) using an evaluation sheet as a basis for assessing participants' contributions. Depending on the format chosen, students may need to consult with each other before rendering their assessment.

In school forums, students could appoint a specific spokesperson to deliver their assessments. An announcement of the assessment may or may not be made before the start of the event, depending on the judgment of the organizers. Viewers could be told during cable TV call-in shows that an assessment of callers' contributions would be made at the conclusion of the program. Such an assessment might help increase awareness among viewers of others' expectations of their participation and raise viewer interest in the program.

Students should enumerate the characteristics of thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs. For example, students could inform audiences that democratic discussion cannot include a disrespectful shouting match and that there are other important characteristics of discussions that further, or fail to further, the democratic process, and are part of the evaluation they are about to hear.

It should be understood that students should only mention faults or give praise where they think they have an adequate basis for doing so; and they should give praise where they believe it is due, not just blame. The purpose of the exercise is to help students understand how debate and discussion should be conducted and what kinds of behavior undermines the purpose of democratic debate. In evaluating participants and discussions, consider the points that follow.

A. THE MEANING OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

Participants should be aware that citizenship means membership in a self-governing community, just as membership in clubs and other organizations is often required to participate in self-government, so membership (citizenship) in the political community is required to take part in its self-government (National Standards, p. 127).

B. THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZENS

Participants should be aware that citizens have responsibilities as well as rights (National Standards, pp. 128–132). They should know that responsibilities may be personal (such as taking care of oneself, supporting one's family, adhering to moral principles, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions) or civic (such as obeying the law, registering to vote and voting knowledgeably, being informed and attentive to public issues, and serving as a juror).

Participants should also be able to distinguish between personal, political, and economic rights and should understand that rights have limits. For example, personal rights include:

- ★ the right to privacy and personal autonomy.
- ★ freedom of thought and conscience.
- ★ freedom of movement and residence.
- ★ right to due process of law and equal protection of law.

Political rights include:

- ★ the right to vote and run for public office.
- ★ freedom of speech.
- ★ freedom of the press.

- ★ freedom of assembly.

Economic rights include the right to:

- ★ acquire, use, transfer, and dispose of property.
- ★ choose one's work and change employment.
- ★ join labor unions and professional societies.
- ★ establish and operate a business.

Participants should also see that rights can conflict both with each other and with other values and interests. Examples include:

- ★ the right to a fair trial and the right to a free press.
- ★ the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression.
- ★ conflict between the public's right to know and the requirements of national security.
- ★ conflict between the right to property and the right of the public to take property for the public good (right of "eminent domain").

C. PARTICIPANT DISPOSITION

Evaluation sheets should ask students to judge participants according to the criteria for furthering American constitutional democracy (National Standards, pp. 132–134):

- 1. Civility.** Do participants disagree without being disagreeable? Do they avoid hostile, abusive, emotional arguments? Avoid illogical arguments and make coherent arguments based on sound evidence or reasoning?
- 2. Open-mindedness and critical thinking.** Do participants consider others' points of view or reject them out of hand? Do they question the validity of varying points of view, including their own?
- 3. Patriotism.** Are their arguments consistent with the fundamental values and principles of American democracy? If not, which values or principles appear to be undermined?

- 4. Toleration of ambiguity.** Are participants tolerant of ambiguity in the matters they discuss? Do they realize that it is often difficult to be certain of factual evidence or of the application of moral or other values?
- 5. Compassion.** Do participants show concern for the well-being of others, especially for the less fortunate? (This item is not intended to be partisan. It should not be interpreted as meaning those who object to particular public programs for the less fortunate are not compassionate. Such programs may be flawed or too expensive and compassion can be expressed in various ways other than public policy.)
- 6. Courage.** Do participants stand up for their convictions when they might retreat from a challenge?

3. Evoke the responsibility of citizens to participate in public affairs, especially through voting and voter-turnout campaigns (National Standards, Section V, C & E, pp. 131–132; 134–136).

Emphasize the responsibility of young citizens to participate in elections knowledgeably and responsibly through newsletters, posters, and community activities that are part of the school program, and neighborhood campaigns to increase voter turnout. Related publicity should also inform citizens (and therefore students) of other activities, not only those related to elections, through which they can participate in community and political affairs. Different forms of participation appeal to different people and participants should be encouraged to find the forms that suit them best.

Explore ways to promote the message “If citizens want their voices to be heard, they must become active in the political process.” (National Standards, p. 135) Inform students and adults about opportunities for political participation (National Standards, p. 136) which might include, among others:

- ★ working for a candidate’s campaign. (Interested individuals can call campaign headquarters to find out what they can do.)
- ★ contacting elected and unelected officials at local, state, and national offices to voice their views or concerns.
- ★ joining and/or actively supporting social or political organizations that represent their point of view.
- ★ expressing their views to newspapers and TV stations/programs, in community meetings, or on Internet discussion groups/bulletin boards.
- ★ opportunities for appointment by local governments to local boards and agencies dealing with matters that concern them.

Finally, teachers should be aware that all mock election activities present an opportunity to include the ideas of the National Standards for Civics and Government. The mock election can make the new standards relevant to the concerns of election campaigns as well as to everyday life. Students should see that the standards are not only applicable at election time, but all the time: dealing with others humanely, understanding and accepting the basic requirements of social life in the daily life of the community, participating effectively in the formal and informal affairs of self-governance, and not just acting, but acting knowledgeably and responsibly.